

# from Song of Myself, Number 33 by Walt Whitman

## BEFORE YOU READ

### LITERARY FOCUS: FREE VERSE

**Free verse** is poetry that does not follow a regular meter (a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables) or rhyme scheme. Instead of having a set number of syllables, for example, a line in a free verse poem can be of any length. Although free verse abandons some elements of traditional poetry, it uses many others. As you read the excerpt from "Song of Myself, Number 33," which is written in free verse, notice how the following devices add to the power and the message of the poem.

<b>alliteration</b>	The repetition of consonant sounds: "I understand the large hearts of heroes,"
<b>assonance</b>	The repetition of vowel sounds: "How the silent old-faced infants and the lifted sick,"
<b>onomatopoeia</b>	The use of words whose sounds echo their meanings: "Hell and despair are upon me, crack and again crack the marksmen,"
<b>parallel structure</b>	The repetition of phrases, clauses, or sentences that have the same grammatical structure: "Again the long roll of the drummers, Again the attacking cannon, mortars,"

### READING SKILLS: PARAPHRASING

When you **paraphrase**, you restate a writer's ideas in your own words. A paraphrase should include all the details of the original. It is unlike a **summary**, which includes only the most important details. Paraphrasing is a useful skill for explaining difficult terms or ideas. It can also help you check your comprehension of what you've read. Here is an example:

**Original Line:** "I understand the large hearts of heroes, / The courage of present times and all times, . . ."

**Sample Paraphrase:** "I know that heroes have enormous compassion. Their courage is everlasting."

**Use the Skill** As you read this excerpt from the poem, paraphrase passages you have trouble understanding.

### REVIEW SKILLS

Look for examples of **figurative language** as you read the following poem.

#### FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Words or phrases that describe one thing in terms of another, very different thing, and are not meant to be taken literally. Figures of speech include similes, metaphors, and personification.



#### Reading Standard 3.3

Analyze the ways in which the author's style and the "sound" of language achieve specific rhetorical or aesthetic purposes.

#### Reading Standard 3.4

Analyze ways in which poets use imagery, personification, figures of speech, and sounds to evoke readers' emotions.

#### Reading Standard 3.7

**(Grade 9–10 Review):** Recognize and understand the significance of figurative language and imagery.

# from Song of Myself

Walt Whitman

## PARAPHRASE

Locate and circle the example of **personification** in line 3. Then, paraphrase the line. (Grade 9–10 Review)

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## IDENTIFY

**Imagery** is the use of language that appeals to the senses. Circle the imagery Whitman uses to describe the people who were rescued (lines 8–9). To what sense do these images mostly appeal?

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## from 33

I understand the large hearts of heroes,  
The courage of present times and all times,  
How the skipper saw the crowded and rudderless wreck of the  
steam-ship, and Death chasing it up and down the storm,  
How he knuckled tight and gave not back an inch, and was  
faithful of days and faithful of nights,

- And chalk'd in large letters on a board, *Be of good cheer, we will*  
5     *not desert you;*  
How he follow'd with them and tack'd with them three days and  
would not give it up,  
How he saved the drifting company at last,  
How the lank loose-gown'd women look'd when boated from  
the side of their prepared graves,  
How the silent old-faced infants and the lifted sick, and the  
sharp-lipp'd unshaved men;  
10 All this I swallow, it tastes good, I like it well, it becomes mine,  
I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there.<sup>1</sup>

1. **I understand . . . I was there:** This stanza was inspired by an incident that occurred in 1853. According to reports in the *New York Weekly Tribune* of January 21, 1854, the ship *San Francisco* sailed from New York City on December 22, 1853, destined for South America. A violent storm hit the ship several hundred miles out of port, washing many passengers overboard. The captain of another ship helped rescue the survivors. A copy of the newspaper story was found among Whitman's papers after his death.

The disdain and calmness of martyrs,  
The mother of old, condemn'd for a witch, burnt with dry  
wood, her children gazing on,  
The hounded slave that flags in the race, leans by the fence,  
blowing, cover'd with sweat,  
The twinges that sting like needles his legs and neck, the  
15 murderous buckshot and the bullets,  
All these I feel or am.

I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs,  
Hell and despair are upon me, crack and again crack the  
marksmen,  
I clutch the rails of the fence, my gore dribs,<sup>2</sup> thinn'd with the  
ooze of my skin,  
20 I fall on the weeds and stones,  
The riders spur their unwilling horses, haul close,  
Taunt my dizzy ears and beat me violently over the head with  
whip-stocks.

Agonies are one of my changes of garments,  
I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become  
the wounded person,  
25 My hurts turn livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe.

I am the mash'd fireman with breast-bone broken,  
Tumbling walls buried me in their debris,  
Heat and smoke I inspired,<sup>3</sup> I heard the yelling shouts of my  
comrades,  
I heard the distant click of their picks and shovels,  
30 They have clear'd the beams away, they tenderly lift me forth.

2. **dribs** *n. pl.*: dribbles.  
3. **inspired** *v.*: breathed in.

#### IDENTIFY

Underline the two martyrs the speaker mentions in lines 12–16.

#### INTERPRET

A **metaphor** is a comparison of unlike things that does not include connecting words such as *like* or *as*. Circle the metaphor in line 23, and explain its meaning. **(Grade 9–10 Review)**

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#### IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 26–30, and find examples of sound devices. Circle examples of **alliteration**. Underline examples of **assonance**. Put a box around repeated words.

## WORD STUDY

Artillery is a noun meaning "weapons." What might an *artillerist* (line 37) be?

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## FLUENCY

Read aloud the boxed passage that tells about the gruesome experiences of an artillery soldier. Note that *plaudits* means "applause," *rent* means "torn," and *entrenchments* means "a fortification of trenches." Look up in a dictionary any other words you don't know. Mark up examples of parallel structures. Then, see how smoothly and dramatically you can read these stanzas, being careful to let the parallel structures create a rhythm.

I lie in the night air in my red shirt, the pervading hush is for  
my sake,  
Painless after all I lie exhausted but not so unhappy,  
White and beautiful are the faces around me, the heads are  
bared of their fire-caps,  
The kneeling crowd fades with the light of the torches.

- 35 Distant and dead resuscitate,  
They show as the dial or move as the hands of me, I am the  
clock myself.

I am an old artillerist, I tell of my fort's bombardment,  
I am there again.

- Again the long roll of the drummers,  
40 Again the attacking cannon, mortars,  
Again to my listening ears the cannon responsive.

- I take part, I see and hear the whole,  
The cries, curses, roar, the plaudits for well-aim'd shots,  
The *ambulanza*<sup>4</sup> slowly passing trailing its red drip,  
45 Workmen searching after damages, making indispensable  
repairs,  
The fall of grenades through the rent roof, the fan-shaped  
explosion,  
The whizz of limbs, heads, stone, wood, iron, high in the air.
- Again gurgles the mouth of my dying general, he furiously  
waves with his hand,  
He gasps through the clot *Mind not me—mind—the  
entrenchments.*

4. *ambulanza* (am bō' lant s): Italian for "ambulance."

*from* Song of Myself, Number 33**Reading Skills: Paraphrasing**

In the left-hand column of the chart below are passages from “Song of Myself, Number 33.” Paraphrase each in the space at the right. Remember to include all details of the original; paraphrases are not summaries. Once you’ve finished paraphrasing, answer the final question that appears below the chart.

Passage from Poem	Paraphrase
<p>I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs, Hell and despair are upon me, crack and again crack the marksmen, I clutch the rails of the fence, my gore dribs, thinn'd with the ooze of my skin, I fall on the weeds and stones, The riders spur their unwilling horses, haul close, Taunt my dizzy ears and beat me violently over the head with whip-stocks. (lines 17–22)</p>	
<p>I lie in the night air in my red shirt, the pervading hush is for my sake, Painless after all I lie exhausted but not so unhappy, White and beautiful are the faces around me, the heads are bared of their fire-caps, The kneeling crowd fades with the light of the torches. (lines 31–34)</p>	

**Evaluate** Compare your paraphrases with the original verses from the poem. What is “lost” in translation?

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Check your Standards Mastery at the back of this book.